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ABSTRACT

A study examined the degree to which members of different ethnic groups--Whites/Anglos, Hispanic/Latinos, Asians, and Blacks--vary in (1) the reasons they adopt for communicating or not communicating with strangers, (2) the situations in which they choose to interact with strangers, and (3) the types of strangers with whom they feel comfortable communicating. Subjects, 237 well-to-do male and female adults living in a large multicultural city on the West Coast and self-identified as to ethnic group, responded to an instrument administered by trained interviewers. Results indicated that Blacks were more likely than other ethnic groups to interact with strangers, and that Asians were the least likely. The four groups did not differ in their reasons for interaction with strangers, which included interest, companionship and help, but rather in their reasons for not interacting, which included shyness and enculturation. Results also indicated that Whites and Hispanics were more likely to communicate with strangers at parties, on vacation, or at bars, but Blacks were more likely to interact with strangers in public places such as stores, the street, and public transportation. As expected, each ethnic group was likely to feel more comfortable communicating with strangers of like ethnicity except for Asians, who were neither more nor less likely to communicate with Asian strangers. Findings suggest that Blacks delineate an outgoing profile, while the Asian profile is reserved and cautious. (A table of data is included, and references are appended.) (NKA)

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STRANGER ETHNICITY AND COMMUNICATION

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of WSCA, Salt Lake City, Utah, February 13-17, 1987. The following individuals made this research project possible: Tamara Berg, Robert Gardner, Gregory Giachino, Bernice Jurs, Kabede McInnis, Rebecca Michaels, Gary Moody, Jamie Strickling, Mark Nelson, Rene Kinney, Joseph Hultberg, Sharon McNally, Carlina Green, Carole Roberts, and Laurel Clark.

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STRANGER ETHNICITY AND COMMUNICATION

If social distance operates in everyday encounters, it ought to operate when communicating with strangers in those relatively uninvolved situations when one is at a party, waiting for a bus, at the store, or at any location where encounters with strangers are possible. In this research study, communicating with strangers excludes those routine exchanges a person may engage in while performing a duty, e.g. a waiter. When the interaction goes beyond a routine job related performance and becomes a conversation, then the event is considered to constitute communication with a stranger.

The questions that motivated this study are: 1. What are the reasons why members of different ethnic groups (Whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Blacks) interact or fail to interact with strangers?; 2. What are the contexts or places in which members of different ethnic groups choose to communicate with strangers?; and 3. Who are the kinds of strangers (including their ethnicity) with whom members of different ethnic groups are likely to communicate?

The answers to the above questions are likely to enhance our understanding of how homophily-heterophily operates across cultures, and the conditions under which social distance increases or decreases depending on ethnicity. Since ethnicity has the potential for accentuating strangeness, it may also affect willingness to interact.

This paper deals with the decisions made before the *entry* (Berger and Calabrese, 1975) phase in the process of initial interactions, when the "other" is a stranger of a different ethnic group. That is, here we are concerned with the approach/avoidance stage before an interaction is engaged in.

In our society, we can assume that there are rules which not only influence how we behave in the initial phases of interactions, but there are also rules and norms which guide us to approach or avoid strangers to begin with. Of course such rules and norms must contain contextual information regarding not only the type of stranger we may approach, avoid, or ignore, but the situations where it is appropriate or inappropriate to do so. One goal of this paper is to make explicit the rules and norms that members of different ethnic groups use when they enter into interactions with strangers of their own or other ethnic groups. Part of the content of the rules we use in initiating interactions with strangers, must consist of predictions about outcomes (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Cultural distance must act as noise in making predictions about the behavior of others. The sixth Axiom stated by Berger and Calabrese (1975), indicates that "similarities between persons

reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produces increases in uncertainty". Of course, it may not only be attitudinal dissimilarity among ethnic groups which may serve as a barrier to initial interactions between strangers of different ethnic groups, but also stereotypes and prejudices, which falsify the outcome of predictions.

In order to approach complete strangers for the first time, the information seeking strategies engaged in by individuals may be said to be passive (rather than active or interactive), since with complete strangers, individuals are more likely to engage in "unobtrusive observation of target individuals to obtain information about them" (Sunnafrank, 1986, p. 6). Consequently the characteristics of the individuals involved, besides their ethnicity, may to a large extent determine whether the target person is approached or not. Crockett and Friedman (1980) state that in initial interactions, each actor engages in inference making, "these inferences commonly begin even before the interaction, as participants examine each other's dress and appearance or react to reports from mutual friends about what the other person is like" (p. 87).

A review of literature related to encounters between strangers across ethnic/cultural lines rendered a relatively small selection of items relevant to this research. Bishop (1979) investigated the role of belief and dialect style on interracial attitudes and behaviors. He argued that "it is evident that the question of relative strength of race and belief across all situations is unanswerable and that greater attention should be given to the conditions under which they are important." (p. 462). Even though his investigation was not directly related to the main questions of the present study, the quoted statement emphasizes that ethnicity alone may not be an unequivocal predictor of interaction if the situation and conditions under which the interaction takes place are taken into consideration. Some evidence substantiating the importance of the situation is provided by a study by Amato (1980) who found that city size (situation) was negatively related to the establishment of eye contact with strangers, smiling and responding verbally, even when controlling for sidewalk density.

Ickes (1984) studied strangers' interaction in Black-White interracial dyads. The results revealed that White individuals talked, smiled, looked more at their partners, and looked with more insistence than their Black counterparts. Also, Whites perceived themselves and were perceived by their Black partners as having been more involved in the interactions. Also, if the White member of the stranger dyad was negatively disposed to interact with Blacks, his/her nonverbal involvement in the interaction was less than when the White interactant was positively disposed towards

interaction with Blacks. Ickes contends that "White subjects , either because of or in anticipation of the perceived difficulty and awkwardness of these initial interracial interactions, felt a particular responsibility and concern for making the interactions work." (p. 334). Although this study was not free of complexities and alternative explanations, it does suggest that there are different ethnic patterns in approach/avoidance behaviors regarding interaction with ethnically different strangers.

A study by Valentine (1980) found that female victims were more likely to receive help from female strangers when the victim looked at the stranger. The presence of another bystander in this study enhanced helping behavior. Another study by Juni and Roth (1981) found that strangers exhibiting a disability and female strangers were more likely to be helped than able bodied persons and males. Neither style of dress nor marital status had an impact on helping behavior. These results emphasize that particular characteristics of strangers may encourage or discourage certain types of interaction.

Simard (1981) conducted two studies with English and French speaking Canadian college students to investigate self-reports and actual acquaintance formations across cultural and linguistic boundaries. In the initial study of self-reports the author found that subjects were more likely feel that external circumstances or situations are key determinants in the formation of new relationships. Among the places where subjects reported they were most likely to make new acquaintances were: parties or group activities and college or university settings. The respondents perceived more public environments like restaurants, bars, parks, etc., as less conducive for the development of new relationships. In terms of the dimensions of similarity perceived to be important for attraction, in descending order of importance, Simard found: Attitudes, language, age, positive traits, social class, political ideas, negative traits, occupation, and finally gender. However, none of the traits were strongly endorsed, and they felt that new acquaintances both ingroup and outgroup are easily made. As expected, subjects perceived that ingroup relationships are more easily initiated. In the second study, when actual behavior was required, the subjects experienced more difficulties in forming a new acquaintance than they thought. Simard concluded that while people may be accepting of cross-cultural acquaintances, inhibitions may hinder actual social behavior. It was nevertheless found that the initiation of cross-cultural relationships was more difficult than intracultural ones. Simard corroborated with her second study that external situational factors are more powerful than internal desires in promoting initiation of interactions with strangers. Concerning the sex of new acquaintances, neither sex was particularly favored. Behaviorally, public places were the

context where more new acquaintances were made, as opposed to those where subjects perceived to be important, i.e., group activities, parties, etc.. This last trend, however, may have been an artifact of the study, since the subjects were under time pressure.

Gudykunst (1983a) found that White respondents perceive that they make more assumptions about strangers based on their cultural background in initial intercultural encounters than in intracultural ones. Gudykunst (1983b) found that members of high-context cultures were more cautious in initial interactions with strangers, made more assumptions about strangers based on their background, and were more inquisitive about the strangers' backgrounds than members of low-context cultures. Gudykunst and Nishida (1984) found that cultural similarity influenced intent to interrogate, intent to self-disclose, and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness. The culture of the individual was found to influence the above dependent variables plus attributional confidence. Gudykunst, Dodetani, and Sonoda (in press) found that ethnolinguistic influences have an impact upon uncertainty reduction processes, i.e. self disclosure, interrogation, display of nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, shared networks, perceived similarity, and low- and high-context measures of attributional confidence. The research conducted by Gudykunst and others has been generally conducted with Asian and White/Anglo subjects. A replication with Black and White subjects rendered results similar to those reported above (Gudykunst and Hammer, in press). These results further substantiate that culture appears to be a determinant of interaction with strangers.

Based on the above review of the literature the present study will address the degree to which members of different ethnic groups, White/Anglo, Hispanic/Latinos, Asians, and Blacks, vary in:

a. The reasons they espouse for communicating or not communicating with strangers,
b. The situations in which they choose to interact with strangers, and
c. The types of strangers with whom they feel comfortable communicating.

No previous research that we encountered compared the four groups under consideration here, nor had any previous research effort studied reasons, contexts, and types of strangers simultaneously.

Methods

In the Spring of 1986 a quota sample of 237 adult (ages 19 to 78) individuals responded to an instrument administered in person by trained interviewers, in a large, multicultural, urban location of the West Coast of the U.S.. Through a method of self-identification, 28% of the respondents were White or Anglo, 24% were Hispanic/Latino, 24% were Asian, and 22% were Black. The sample was equally divided by sex. The average respondent was 38 years old, and had a household income of $32,300.00 per year. A pilot study of 32 individuals inquired, in an open ended fashion, about the reasons, situations, and types of strangers with whom the respondents interacted. The results of that pilot rendered the refined instrument which was finally administered to the sample of 237 respondents.

In the final instrument before the interview started, the interviewer informed the interviewee that "we will consider that communicating with strangers excludes those routine exchanges a person may engage in while performing a duty, like a waiter. When the interaction goes beyond the routine job related performance and becomes a conversation, then we consider that communicating with strangers."

Respondents were initially asked to estimate the number of times (TIMES) during a normal day in which they talk with strangers (M=4.00, SD=2.80), and the number of times when they initiate (START) the conversation (M=2.80, SD=2.60).

By means of a scale ranging from 0 to 5 the respondents were asked to indicate how much like themselves was each of a number of statements regarding communication with strangers. Reasons for interacting, reasons for not interacting, places where interaction occurs, and types of strangers with whom individuals feel comfortable interacting were submitted to principal factor analyses, with varimax rotation, for the purposes of data reduction and index construction. An eigenvalue of 1.00 was selected as the criterion for the extraction of reliable factors. Variables loading .40 or higher were included in average indexes (the variables were summed and divided by the number of variables). Variables loading on more than one factor were deleted since they did not aid in discriminating the data.

<u>Reasons for interacting with strangers</u>

Eleven reasons loaded into four factors as follows: An index named INTEREST was formed by adding: "they appear to be interested in talking" (M=3.43, SD=1.37, Loading (L)=.52); "you are interested in a friendship" (M=2.60, SD=1.66, L=.61); "you are attracted" (M=2.86, SD=1.63, L=.75); "you have something to gain from the interaction" (M=3.10, SD=1.53, L=.54). COMPANIONSHIP was formed by adding: "you like companionship" (M=2.77,

SD=1.50, L=.59); "you like to fill time when there is nothing else to do" (M=2.19, SD=1.63, L=.55); "you like sharing your interests" (M=2.90, SD=1.52, L=.76); "your intuition tells you to talk to someone" (M=2.84, SD=1.61, L=.48). HELP was composed of: "you see they have a problem" (M=3.24, SD=1.46, L=.46); "you need help" (M=3.13, SD=1.63, L=..60); An isolate loading variable on the fourth factor was UNCOMFORTABLE "you are there, nearby, without speaking and you feel uncomfortable" (M=2.23, SD=1.55, L=.52).

Reasons for not interacting with strangers

Eleven reasons for not interacting with strangers resulted in three indexes: SHY was formed with: "when they seem to be busy" (M=3.86, SD=1.31, L=.42); "because you don't like to bother people" (M=3.00, SD=1.56, L=.68); "because you like to do your thing and be left alone" (M=2.95, SD=1.51, L=.49); "because you tend to be shy" (M=2.71, SD=1.55, L=.61); "when the other person is with someone else" (M=2.88, SD=1.42, L=.49); "when they look intimidating" (M=3.29, SD=1.54, L=.41). DIRTYCRAZY was formed with: "when they look dirty" (M=3.55, SD=1.63, L=.52), and "when they look crazy" (M=4.01, SD=1.48, L=.75). PREDISPOSE was composed of: "when they look disabled" (M=2.33, SD=1.59, L=.51); "because you have been repeatedly told not to talk to strangers" (M=1.84, SD=1.63, L=.64); "when they are smoking" (M=2.06, SD=1.81, L=.47).

Places where communication with strangers is likely to occur

Nine places resulted in two indexes and two isolate variables as follows: SOCIAL was formed with: "at parties" (M=4.01, SD=1.16, L=.59); "when alone on vacation" (M=3.41, SD=1.53, L=.56); "when with friends on vacation" (M=2.70, SD=1.28, L=.62); "at a bar or cafe" (M=2.85, SD=1.56, L=.65). The items in PUBLIC were: "in public transportation" (M=2.54, SD=1.65, L=.63); "at a store, bank, post office, library, or other public places" (M=3.41, SD=1.37, L=.563); "on the street" (M=2.22, SD=1.44, L=.70). CHURCH was "at church" (M=3.24, SD=1.75, L=.60). ELEVATOR was "in elevators" (M=2.39, SD=1.65) and did not load on any factor.

Types of strangers

The respondents were asked to estimate how comfortable they feel communicating with 12 different types of strangers (scale 0-5, as above). These scales were factor analyzed as the above scales, however, no solution was obtained which clustered the variables in a conceptually viable way, consequently these scales were analyzed separately: MALES (M=3.66, SD=1.26); FEMALES (M=3.89, SD=1.10); SAMESES "same social status as you" (M=4.22, SD=1.03); HIGHERSES "higher social status than you" (M=3.51, SD=1.30); LOWERSES "lower social status than you" (M=3.74, SD=1.18);

OWNAGE "about your own age" (M=4.23, SD=1.05); OLDER "older than you" (M=4.10, SD=1.05); YOUNGER (M=4.00, SD=1.14); WHITE STRANGER "White" (M=4.20, SD=0.96); BLACK STRANGER "Black" (M=3.78, SD=1.16); HISPANIC STRANGER "Hispanic or Latino" (M=3.86, SD=1.15); ASIAN STRANGER "Asian" (M=3.84, SD=1.16).

Demographics

The respondents were asked to report their education "starting from the first grade in elementary school, how many years of schooling have you had?" (M=15.00, SD=3.3); their income "would you estimate for me the total yearly income of your household?" (M=32,300.00, SD=19,800.00); their marital status "are you in a steady relationship or married? (Yes=57%, No=43%)"; their ethnicity "which of the following best represents your background? White or Anglo(28%), Hispanic/Latino(24%), Asian(24%), Black(22%), Other(2%)"; their age (M=38.00, SD=13.50); and the interviewer recorded the gender of the respondent (Males=49%, Female=51%).

The data was submitted to an ANOVA routine in which the ethnicity of the respondent constituted the independent variable, and in which each of the variables of interest (reasons, places, and types of persons) were the dependent variables. Duncan's multiple range tests were used for *post hoc* comparisons of means if the initial overall ANOVA was found to be statistically significant at the probability level of $\leq .05$.

Results

Table 1 contains group means for each dependent variable for each ethnic group, the overall significance of each ANOVA test, and Duncan range test *post hoc* comparisons when the initial ANOVA was found to be statistically significant.

Table 1 about here

The results indicate that Blacks are generally more likely than others to converse with strangers and to initiate interactions with them. Asians are least likely to interact with strangers. Interestingly, the four different ethnic groups do not differ in the reasons for which they interact with strangers, however, they do differ in their reasons for *not* doing so. Asians appear to be the shyest and most negatively disposed to interact with strangers. Blacks and Whites appear to be the least shy and the least negatively predisposed.

Regarding places where interactions with strangers take place, Whites and Hispanics report they are most likely to communicate with strangers at parties, on vacation, or at bars of cafes. Asians, again tend to be the least likely to use those situations as opportunities for interaction with strangers. Blacks distinguished themselves by being different from all other ethnic groups in their increased likelihood of interacting with strangers in public places such as public transportation, stores, banks, the street, and even elevators.

Asians are particularly reluctant to communicate with male strangers as compared with Whites, and most reluctant to communicate with females as compared with every other group. Asians are also most reluctant to interact with individuals of higher status, as well as with individuals of a similar age group or older. As expected, each ethnic group is most likely to feel comfortable communicating with strangers of its own ethnicity except for Asians who are not more nor less likely to communicate with Asian strangers.

In order to further clarify the results two-way ANOVAS of ethnicity by gender were conducted for each dependent variable, because gender could clearly affect individuals' dispositions toward interactions with strangers. No significant interaction effect was found for ethnicity and gender for any of the dependent variables. One interaction effect approached significance ($p \leq .06$) indicating that Black women were more likely to feel uncomfortable communicating with strangers than their male counterparts (2.80 vs. 1.64), while the opposite trend was observed for White respondents (2.08 vs. 2.41). Only on three occasions was gender found to have a main effect. Women (3.98) were more likely than men (3.53) to endorse not interacting with strangers when they look "dirty" or "crazy." Men were more likely than women to be willing to interact with strangers due to interest and attraction (3.21 vs.2.79), and were also more likely to feel comfortable communicating with male strangers (3.93 vs. 3.36).

Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate the possibility that different ethnic groups differ in their communication with strangers, namely: 1. The reasons they endorse for communicating or for failing to communicate with strangers; 2. The places where communication with strangers occurs; and 3. The types of strangers with whom they are willing to communicate. White/Anglo, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Black respondents were found to be different from each other on several aspects of their communication with strangers. Blacks appeared to delineate a profile of outgoingness, while

Asians were most reserved and cautious. Hispanics did not particularly differentiate themselves from Whites and/or Blacks on most aspects. Whites were similar to Blacks in many respects, liberal but not as outgoing. The homophily principle received consistent support. Each ethnic group was most likely to feel comfortable communicating with strangers of its own ethnic group, except for Asians.

These results are important because they provide additional evidence substantiating that there are communicative differences across ethnic groups. Interestingly, the reasons for communicating with strangers did not differentiate across ethnic groups while reasons for not communicating did. Across cultures we all seem to share the same degree of desire for social interaction out of interest, out of loneliness, because we or others need help, or because we just feel uncomfortable without saying anything to those around us. Perhaps negative reasons differentiate groups because they have more weight in our view of the world (Brislin, 1981). Enculturation processes may account for the result that Hispanic and Asian respondents said they sometimes choose not to interact out of shyness. Asians were, in particular, negatively predisposed to interact with strangers, presumedly because they have been socialized to avoid interaction with them.

Of particular interest is the finding that Blacks exhibited a tendency to feel comfortable interacting with strangers in public places, while others were less inclined to do so. Simard (1981) found that her respondents were more favorable (attitudinally not necessarily in a conative fashion) towards interaction in social situations than in public places. Simard's respondents were Anglo and French Canadians. This study suggests that context or situation differentiates across cultural groups. Also, substantiating Simard's findings (her conative study), this research has provided evidence that in most instances, interactions with strangers are easier within cultural groups than across cultural boundaries. The fact that reasons for interaction did not differentiate across ethnic/cultural groups may be consistent with Simard's finding that external, not internal, factors account for interactions with strangers. In other words, we may all be somewhat favorable to interact with strangers for a set of internal reasons, however, what differentiates us are the situations/contexts, the reasons for avoiding interaction, and the types of strangers involved. This line of thought, along with the findings, is consistent with previous research suggesting that in the abstract our attitudes may not necessarily correspond to our overt behavior, however, when concrete attitudes are elicited, a closer match could be expected between attitudes and overt behaviors (Liska, 1975).

The finding that Asians were particularly reluctant to interact with strangers, Asian or not, is consistent with Gudykunst's (1983b) results that members of high-context cultures appear to more cautious in initial interactions with strangers. Gudykunst and Kim (1984) explained that "Asians tend to avoid contact with strangers because their behavior is not predictable. The strangers from North America [presumedly White/Anglo] have a different approach to people who are unknown and unfamiliar: don't avoid them; approach them and try to get to know them. In other words, the strangers are applying a different communication rule for dealing with people who are unknown." (p. 78). Gudykunst and Kim further argue that across cultural lines, particularly in communication with Asian strangers, Westerners may be particularly surprised when Asians apply to them their cultural rule for dealing with strangers, i.e. to treat the stranger as a non-person.

Most previous research dealing with cultural differences in communication with strangers has ignored the initial stage of the interaction, the approach/avoidance stage. The results of this study emphasize that there are cultural differences in approaching and avoiding strangers, and that these trends ought to be considered in future research dealing with initial interactions with strangers. Particularly, uncertainty reduction processes appears to start before actual communication acts are engaged in (Sunnafrank, 1986), and they may effectively promote or impede interpersonal communication contact among humans.

These findings should be qualified. The sample was a quota sample, and all respondents were interviewed in English, by interviewers who were not necessarily of their own ethnicity. The fact that, for example, Hispanics did not differ much from Whites or Blacks on several dimensions may be attributed to the possibility that the individuals interviewed were relatively acculturated. If interviewers of the ethnicity of the respondents had been employed in all cases the results may have differed. There is some evidence that this last limitation may not have affected these results. There were no significant differences across ethnic/culture groups on an item, included in the questionnaire, asking: "On a scale from 0 to 5, how much did you enjoy this interview." In addition, since this study was conducted through an interviewing schedule, replications of this research should be conducted through observational non-obtrusive methods, in multicultural environments, to substantiate or invalidate these findings.

Taking all cautions into consideration, these findings add to our body of knowledge on communication with strangers, and the role of homophily-heterophily in mediating interaction across ethnic and cultural boundaries.

In order for humans to better communicate among ourselves, our differences and similiarities should be made explicit, just as our image in the mirror allows us to better groom ourselves.

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Table 1. ANOVAS of Ethnicity by Each Dependent Variable

	Ethnicity of Respondent			
	White/Anglo	Hispanic/Latino	Asian	Black
TIMES*	4.02ab	3.95ab	3.29a	4.93b
START*	2.80a	2.74a	2.09a	3.76b
Reasons for...				
INTEREST	3.03	3.04	2.79	3.09
COMPANIONSHIP	2.70	2.67	2.51	2.84
HELP	3.44	3.10	3.24	2.95
UNCOMFORTABLE	2.29	2.36	2.18	2.21
Reasons for not...				
SHY*	2.96a	3.19ab	3.40b	2.96a
DIRTYCRAZY	3.76	3.77	4.00	3.52
PREDISPOSE*	1.64a	2.18bc	2.60c	1.86ab
Places...				
SOCIAL*	3.61b	3.75b	3.21a	3.47ab
PUBLIC*	2.72a	2.72a	2.38a	3.23b
CHURCH	3.13	3.26	3.02	3.62
ELEVATOR*	2.14a	2.33a	2.20a	3.09b
Types of strangers				
MALES*	3.93b	3.71ab	3.25a	3.62ab
FEMALES*	4.11b	3.95b	3.46a	4.00b
SAMESES*	4.38b	4.19ab	3.88a	4.40b
HIGHERSES*	3.72b	3.54b	2.93a	3.79b
LOWERSES	3.95	3.75	3.44	3.69
OWNAGE*	4.31b	4.25b	3.86a	4.42b
OLDER*	4.23b	4.17b	3.68a	4.27b
YOUNGER	4.08	4.05	3.67	4.02
WHITE STRANGER*	4.50c	4.24bc	3.82a	4.13ab
BLACK STRANGER*	3.86b	3.84b	3.30a	4.13b
HISPANIC STRANGER*	3.80b	4.40c	3.34a	3.87b
ASIAN STRANGER	3.82	3.74	3.95	3.81

* $p \leq .05$: Group means with the same subscripts do not differ beyond $p \leq .05$ according to Duncan's multiple range tests